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## A BIBLE LESSON ON SPYING

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For the past few years the Central Intelligence Agency has come under considerable scrutiny. Major issues have been raised regarding oversight and control, the intent being to insure accountability and legality. With the advent of the Carter administration, the issue of morality has also been made a major concern. Today the CIA and the nation are confronted with a perplexing situation: how can we engage in secret operations with oversight of these operations lying essentially in the public domain (Congress) and conduct inherently insidious spying activities that must also conform to traditional non-spying standards of ethical conduct and morality.

In an effort to seek some solutions to these problems, it is natural that we should explore historical precedents to determine what lessons and insights the past might offer. One rich source of information that should not be overlooked is the Holy Bible. The purpose therefore of this discussion is to explore the issue of spying as it occurs in the Bible and examine the lessons it might offer. Perhaps new perspectives can be found that will offer guidance regarding how "... one Nation, under God ..." should go about the business of spying.

The subject of spying appears in numerous places throughout the Old and New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Spies were used by the Israelites against their adversaries, and on occasion various factions within the tribes of Israel used spies against each other. In the New Testament, spies were used by the political forces opposed to the emerging Christian movement and by members of the early Christian church to protect itself. There are many additional incidents in which individuals clearly engaged in espionage activities but are not normally referenced using those terms. For example, Judas could be described as having been a secret agent for the Sanhedrin because of his role in the betrayal of Jesus.

Spying as an activity is not treated as an issue in either the Old or the New Testaments and is discussed or mentioned only as an event worth reporting. As a consequence, the lessons to be learned from examining the Scriptures must be inferred in the context of narrative experiences. Guidance to be derived from the study of biblical spying events is therefore subjective and dependent upon the approach and depth from which inferences are drawn. In this discussion, however, the objective has been to emphasize the facts and keep interpretations to a minimum.

The earliest mention of spying in the Old Testament occurs in the story of Joseph.<sup>2</sup> After Joseph had been sold by his brothers into bondage and had later maneuvered himself into a position of influence in the Egyptian government, his

<sup>1</sup> All references cited in this article can be found in the *Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Thomas Nelson and Sons, New York, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 42:6-17

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brothers came to Egypt to buy food during a famine. They were brought before Joseph but did not recognize him. Joseph, however, did recognize them, and in an effort to hide his recognition, accused them of coming to Egypt not to buy food but to spy. Evidently spying was an established fact of life, well familiar to Joseph.

There are only two spying incidents in the Bible in which methods and sources are discussed in any detail, and both occur in the Old Testament. The first incident occurred under the direction of Moses shortly after he led the Israelites out of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> They had camped in the wilderness of Paran near the boundary of the Promised Land, and Moses used spies to determine what the Promised Land was like. The second occurred approximately 40 years later under the direction of Joshua.<sup>4</sup> At that time, the Israelites had completed their sojourn in the desert and were again about to enter the Promised Land. There is a remarkable contrast not only in terms of methods and sources used by these two outstanding biblical leaders, but also in the different administrative procedures governing these two operations and the kinds of people involved. From an analysis of these two operations, biblical experience and perspectives with respect to spying are revealed.<sup>5</sup>

The children of Israel were divided into 12 tribes, or family groups, each tribe having its own leaders and hierarchy. The society was predominantly patriarchal in nature with the leader of each tribe acting as a kind of benevolent dictator or governor over his group. In him was vested the responsibility for providing administrative, legal, military, social, economic, and religious guidance and leadership. Moses was the overall leader and spokesman of the tribes but he exercised final authority only upon the consensus of the people and the leaders of the 12 tribes. Forty years later Joshua occupied roughly the same position as Moses. Both men, therefore, were not absolute rulers of the tribes of Israel. The people could, and occasionally did, reject their leadership.

Moses conducted the earliest spying operation recorded in the Bible. As previously mentioned, the purpose of this operation was to "spy out" Canaan.<sup>6</sup> He chose 12 prominent individuals, one from each of the 12 tribes, to be his spies and instructed them to go into the Promised Land and learn what the land was like. To provide proof that indeed it was a "land flowing with milk and honey," he instructed his spies to return with samples of fruit. These spies spent 40 days in the Promised Land, returned as instructed with information regarding the cities and the population, and delivered samples of fruit. Upon their return, they reported their findings publicly to Moses and the 12 tribes. They brought back a uniform opinion regarding the cities, number of people, lay of the land, and the fact that the countryside was indeed "flowing with milk and honey." Ten of the spies, however, reported that the people were so physically large and well organized that if an invasion was attempted, the Israelites would be destroyed. Only two of the spies reported that they were confident that they could succeed and argued strenuously to go forward with the invasion. In the ensuing public debate, the Israelites became frightened by the negative report of the 10 spies and lost confidence that they could succeed in an invasion. They advocated stoning the two spies who said that an invasion should be attempted.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 13-14

<sup>4</sup> Joshua 2

<sup>5</sup> Intelligence operations by Moses and Joshua have previously figured in "Decision Trees" by Dr. Edwin C. Sapp, *Studies XVIII/4*, and "Scientific and Technical Intelligence" by Robert M. Clark, *Studies XIX/1*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>6</sup> The complete story of the espionage mission can be found in Numbers 13 and Numbers 14:1-10. The consequences are described in Numbers 14:10-34.

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Moses was distraught at the loss of confidence by the Israelites, especially after they had been safely delivered out of Egypt and had successfully crossed the Red Sea. Their attitude brought them dangerously close to losing their status as God's chosen people, but Moses argued successfully on their behalf. They were nevertheless severely punished for their failure. They were told that they would be required to remain in the wilderness one year for every day the spies spent in the Promised Land, that is, 40 years for the 40 days spent spying. They were furthermore told that everyone over the age of 20 would be denied entry into the Promised Land, and that the only exceptions would be the two spies who maintained their faith. Even Moses was told he would not enter the Promised Land, and he did not.<sup>7</sup> Thus the first spying operation discussed in the Bible ended in failure and had disastrous consequences for the population.

Forty years later the Israelites found themselves again preparing to enter the Promised Land, this time under the leadership of Joshua.<sup>8</sup> Joshua was, by the way, one of the two surviving spies who had participated in the operation conducted under Moses.<sup>9</sup> As before, there was a need to send spies into the Promised Land to get intelligence to support the invasion. Joshua, however, went about things quite differently. He chose two young men whose names are not recorded and instructed them to go into Canaan and to reconnoiter the city of Jericho.<sup>10</sup> The spies went to Jericho and visited a harlot named Rahab. Although the presence of the spies was reported to the local authorities, Rahab hid the spies and kept them from being captured. She told the two spies that the people had been expecting an Israelite invasion for some time. She reported that—despite the fact that the city was well fortified and the army well trained—the people were frightened of the Israelites and had lost the courage to stand up to them. The escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians, their successful crossing of the Red Sea, the subsequent destruction of Pharaoh and his armies, and their exploits during their 40 years of wandering in the desert were well known to the people and had convinced them of the Israelites' superiority. Rahab likewise was convinced the city would fall and made an agreement with the spies that she would help them leave the city and not reveal what she had told them if in return they would spare her and her family during the attack. The spies agreed and with Rahab's help they successfully escaped capture and eventually made their way back to their own people. The spies reported to Joshua everything that had happened, especially the information given to them by the harlot regarding the fear of the people.

Using this information, Joshua made plans for the invasion and reported his plan to the 12 tribes. The plan was approved, the invasion proceeded, and the attack, capture, and subsequent destruction of the city of Jericho was successful.<sup>11</sup> Rahab and her family were, as agreed, spared by Joshua during the battle of Jericho.<sup>12</sup>

The contrast between these two incidents is significant. Moses used 12 people, all amateurs, each with both political and military responsibilities in his own tribe. Each was a prominent individual who is named in the Bible. On the other hand, Joshua apparently used two professional (throughout they were referred to only as "spies") anonymous (their names are not given) people to conduct his mission. Moses' spies brought back reports only of the physical characteristics of the land, whereas Joshua's also reported the attitude of the people. The spies Moses sent made their report

<sup>7</sup>Deuteronomy 1:37

<sup>8</sup>Joshua 1:1-2

<sup>9</sup>Deuteronomy 1:38

<sup>10</sup>The mission into Jericho is described in Joshua 2.

<sup>11</sup>Joshua 3, 4, 5, and 6:1-21

<sup>12</sup>Joshua 6:22-25

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openly, and the discussion that followed was conducted in public. Joshua's spies, by contrast, reported only to Joshua, who then made the necessary decisions. Moses' spies, who also would have been principals in any military actions to be taken, participated in the decision-making process. Joshua's spies neither had leadership responsibilities nor did they participate in the policy-making decision process. The consequences of these two operations are significantly different. Moses' operation, conducted by amateurs more or less in the public domain, resulted in a weakening of Moses' position of authority, led to a loss of the people's confidence in themselves, and precipitated an extended period of severe national punishment. Joshua's operation, conducted in private by professionals, led to an achievement of national destiny.

An implicit point is made regarding the procedures used during these two spying operations. It is not specifically stated, but one is left with the impression that the 12 spies sent by Moses more or less went about their business as tourists, and the report they brought back is typical of the kind of thing that a tourist would report. The information reported to Moses consisted both of facts and conclusions drawn by the spies. The negative report given by the majority of the spies, for example, reflected their perception regarding the consequences of military actions, which, if taken, they would be called upon to lead. The people agreed with the negative position, not because of facts reported, but because of the negative interpretation given these facts by individuals of prominence.

Joshua's spies, on the other hand, went in secret (although they were discovered) and visited a harlot who gave them valuable information regarding the attitude of her people. The spies did not interpret this information but simply reported to Joshua what they had been told. No moral judgment was made regarding the fact that Joshua's spies visited a harlot, nor is the information provided by her judged to be of questionable validity.

The relationship between Rahab and the spies was evidently amoral. No conditions of "conversion" were imposed in the recruitment, but merely an agreement for conspiratorial silence in exchange for a harlot's life. Joshua made no recorded comment or judgment regarding his spies' recruitment or the agreement with the harlot. He did, however, honor the agreement, despite the fact that he had not given his prior approval and took no part in making it. After the Battle of Jericho, Rahab joined the Israelites and lived with them. No mention is made of whether or not she continued to practice her old profession. All references to her, in both the Old and the New Testament, refer to her only as "Rahab the harlot."

If there is a lesson to be learned, it would appear that a strong case is made for the conduct of spying activities in secret by professionals, unencumbered by other political or military responsibilities, and that these professionals should report in secret to higher authority who would make policy decisions without debate. Spies should definitely not participate in the policy-decision-making process, nor should they take their cases to the public. When that occurs, although stoning is passé, the people are likely to throw figurative rocks at the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

It can be argued that the Moses operation suffered from complications that arose because of oversight and political issues. The selection of twelve spies, one from each of the twelve tribes, was probably motivated by political considerations, and the very specific instructions given by Moses to the spies were probably necessary in order to define the specific objectives and procedures in order to obtain approval from the twelve tribes. All the Israelites knew that the operation was to occur, who was going, and what they were to accomplish on the mission. When they returned, their report



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was likewise made in public, the results of which have been noted earlier. It is noteworthy that the spies successfully accomplished all mission objectives. The point at which the Moses operation actually failed can be traced to the negative comments made during the public "mission debriefing." Taken overall, it can be argued that the negative report of the spies and the loss of control over the situation was actually stimulated because of too much oversight and the tightly controlled administrative procedures used. In summary, this episode is a classic example of an operation that was successful, but in which the "patient" died.

The contrasts offered by the Joshua operation are startling. Joshua certainly did not have an oversight problem, nor did he worry about defining a politically acceptable mission scenario. His spies were sent in secret, were given absolutely minimal instructions, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho," and reported back only to Joshua. The operational scenario could hardly have been predicted, and if it could, it is questionable that it would have been met with approval. Joshua handled all administrative matters alone, provided flexible and responsive support to his spies by keeping their bargain, and made the necessary judgments required to successfully lead his people to victory. From a purely administrative point of view, the Joshua mission was a nightmare; nevertheless, the operation can only be judged as an unqualified success.